Objectives

1. Engage students in the story and themes of an excerpt from Beverly Cleary’s epistolary children’s novel Dear Mr. Henshaw, preparing them to discuss and write critical responses to the text.

2. Practice and reinforce the following Grade 3 ELA Common Core Standards for reading literature, writing, and speaking and listening:
   - READING: LITERATURE – RL.3.1-6, 9-10
   - WRITING – W.3.1-8, 10
   - SPEAKING AND LISTENING – SL.3.1-6

Time

140 minutes (with an additional 250 minutes of extension possibilities)

Materials

SyncTV Premium Lesson on Beverly Cleary’s Dear Mr. Henshaw

Overview

Beverly Cleary (b. April 12, 1916) is one of the most successful living children’s authors, having penned more than thirty books in the genre, many of them now considered classics. Among these now-classics is the 1984 novel Dear Mr. Henshaw, winner of the Newbery Medal for children’s literature and selected in 2007 as one of the Teachers’ Top 100 Books for Children by the National Education Association. The novel follows Leigh Botts, an elementary school student who writes letters to his favorite author, the fictional Boyd Henshaw, and is surprised one day to find a response in the mail from Mr. Henshaw himself. Dear Mr. Henshaw is an epistolary novel, meaning that the story and its events are relayed through a series of documents: first, as Leigh’s letters and Mr. Henshaw’s responses; then, as Leigh takes heed of Mr. Henshaw’s advice, the novel becomes Leigh’s own personal diary, which Leigh uses to work through the problems plaguing him. In this Premium Lesson, students will read two excerpts from Leigh’s diary in Dear Mr. Henshaw, exploring his struggles at school and his complex thoughts about his absent father. The novel’s diary format will allow students a close vantage point from which to analyze Leigh’s experiences and to compare them with their own. After a close reading, students will participate in class- and group-led discussions about the story and its characters, and will then write critical responses to the text consistent with the ELA Common Core Standards for the third grade.
Background (10 minutes)

1. **Watch the Preview (SL.3.1-3).** As a group, watch the video preview of the premium lesson. After viewing, use the following questions to spur a discussion:

   a. “Things are just not going Leigh’s way,” the preview begins. Then it lists the challenges in Leigh’s life. What are the challenges in your own life? Have you ever felt like things are just not going your way, as Leigh does? Why?

   b. Do you have any favorite authors, as Leigh does? Who are they? What kinds of stories do you like to read? Share a memorable story or author you like, and explain why you think this story or author connected with you.

   c. Why is it funny when Leigh says he “licked” Mr. Henshaw’s book? Why do you think the letter Leigh gets from Mr. Henshaw will “change his life forever”? Guess what the author might say to Leigh that will have such a strong effect.

Extension (additional 60 minutes)

d. **Discuss and Write (SL.3.1-2 and W.3.4, 8).** Ask students if they keep a diary, or if they’ve ever thought about keeping a diary. In preparation for reading the following excerpts from *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, have students write a couple of diary entries on their own. One of the entries should be an account of a particular struggle or challenge they’ve faced, and how they overcame it. The other entry can be about whatever they want. Collect their two diary entries, and have a class discussion about the experience. Questions to ask the class: How did it make you feel? Would you do it on your own? Does it help to write about your struggles? Why or why not?

f. **Maps (SL.3.1, 4, 6 and W.3.7).** *Dear Mr. Henshaw* takes place in California, a place that may or may not be familiar to students. But a brief familiarization with California might help students visualize the world of the novel—especially if you plan to assign the complete text as reading. Have students work in pairs, each pair researching a different city, place, or landmark in the state of California. Have each pair give a short in-class presentation on their findings.

Engaging the Text (130 minutes)

2. **Read the Text (40 minutes)**

   a. **Read and Annotate (RL.3.1-6).** Have students read and annotate the introduction and excerpt. If students are completing as a homework assignment, ask them to write any questions they have into the annotation tool—these questions are visible
to you after the students submit their writing assignments, or beforehand if you use the “Mimic” function to access the students’ accounts.

b. **Discuss** (*SL.3.1-3*). Have students get into small groups or pairs and briefly discuss the questions and inferences they had while reading.

c. **Organize** (*RL.3.3, 6 and SL.3.1, 4-6 and ELL*). In pairs or small groups, have students list all the different challenges Leigh faces in these excerpts. After they complete their respective charts, bring the class together for group discussion and compile a master list. Brainstorm what Leigh could do to face or overcome these different challenges both at home and at school.

**Extension (additional 50 minutes)**

d. **Listen and Discuss** (*SL.3.1-3*). As a class, listen to the audio reading of the text. Ask students to share how their understanding of the text changed after listening. What additional images came to mind? What words did the author use to develop the setting?

e. **Comprehend** (*RL.3.1-6, 10*). Have students complete the multiple-choice questions. Collect papers or discuss answers as a class.

f. **Read Aloud** (*SL.3.5*). Have students record themselves reading passages from the excerpt aloud. Listen to their recordings and offer suggestions for improvement.

3. **Watch SyncTV (30 minutes)**

   a. **Watch** Either watch the SyncTV discussion as a class or ask students to watch it on their individual computers.

   b. **Focus** (*SL.3.1-3 and RL.3.1, 3, 6*). Students should watch the portion from 1:59-2:22, as Lola uses a detail from the text to make a larger inference about Leigh’s state of mind. This is a good model of how to use your own knowledge and understanding to draw conclusions about something (e.g., a character, an idea) in a text.

   c. **Focus** (*SL.3.1-3 and RL.3.1, 3-5*). Between 2:35-3:26, the SyncTV students attempt to answer the prompt using a particular quote as evidence of Mr. Fridley’s concern for Leigh. Have your own students pay close attention to this segment, especially when it comes to the discussion of whether the quote offers evidence or not.

   d. **Focus** (*SL.3.1-3, 5 and RL.3.1, 3-5*). Now, skip ahead to 4:51-5:42 and watch how the students work through the problems with the aid of both graphic organizers and evidence-based reasoning. Ask your students to consider how graphic organizers can aid their understanding of a text.

   e. **Discuss** (*SL.3.1-6 and RL.3.1-6, 10*). After watching the model discussion, have a conversation with the class about the ideas discussed in the SyncTV episode. What new thoughts do they have after hearing the students’ discussion? Next, divide students into small groups (3-4 students). Move around the room monitoring groups as students follow the SyncTV episode as a model to discuss some of the following questions:

   i. How does Mr. Fridley’s quote (as discussed in the SyncTV episode) prove that he cares about Leigh, even if he does not say so directly? How can we infer something is true, even if it is not stated directly?

   ii. Sometimes people say things directly, and other times they say things...
indirectly. What is the difference between a direct statement and an indirect statement? Give an example of each from Dear Mr. Henshaw, and give an example of each from your own experience. Why do you think people are often indirect in their words and actions?

iii. Does Leigh state his feelings directly or indirectly in his conversation with his father? Similarly, how does Leigh’s father express his feelings? What can we infer about the way Leigh’s father feels about his son? How do we know this? Provide examples from the text.

iv. When Leigh says that he doesn’t care, do you believe him? When a person says they don’t care about anything, what kinds of emotions are they usually trying to express? To answer this, try drawing from your own knowledge and experiences—the same way Lola does in the SyncTV episode.

v. Why is it important to think positively, as Mr. Fridley states? Why is it important to “care”? How does a positive outlook affect the way you feel and behave? What are some things we can all do to think more positively? How can we make ourselves care?

vi. How does keeping a diary or journal help Leigh work through his personal struggles? Why do people write in a diary? What kinds of benefits does this offer? Have you ever tried to keep a diary? Would you? Why or why not?

Extension (additional 60 minutes)

f. Organize (SL.3.1, 4-6 and W.3.1-2, 8). Now that students have utilized graphic organizers to answer questions about a text (or seen how it’s done), have them make their own graphic organizers to help create a plan for Leigh to face his challenges at both school and home. First, split the class into four or five small groups, and then have each group work on a short presentation for how Leigh will overcome the obstacles he faces with the lunch thief, his parents’ divorce, his struggle to “care,” and more. These presentations should each include a visual graphic organizer on poster boards that breaks down a strategy for Leigh. Encourage both thoughtfulness and creativity in the group presentations!

g. Create (SL.3.1). Between the two excerpts students have read, we can infer that Leigh built his own “lunchbox alarm” to help stop the lunch thief. For a fun creative activity related to Dear Mr. Henshaw, have students work in pairs or small groups to build their own lunchbox alarms. Then, test them to see if they work! Or, for further group activities, have students create any number of smart and different solutions to classic school problems.

4. Think (10 minutes)

a. Respond (W.3.1, 4). Ask students to read the “Think” questions, watch the corresponding video clips, and respond to the questions, either in class or for homework.

5. Write (50 minutes)

a. Discuss (SL.3.1). Read the prompt you have chosen for students, and then solicit questions regarding the prompt or the assignment expectations. Whichever prompt you have chosen, make sure you are clear about the assignment expectations and the rubric by which you and the other students will be evaluating them.
b. **Organize** (*RL.3.1-6, 10 and W.3.1-2, 5*). Ask students to go back and annotate the text with the prompt in mind. They should be organizing their thoughts and the points they’ll address in their writing as they make annotations. If you’ve worked on outlining or other organizational tools for writing, this is a good place to apply them.

c. **Write** (*W.3.1-2, 4-6, 8, 10*). Have students go through the writing process of planning, revising, editing, and publishing their writing responses.

d. **Review** (*W.3.4-6*). Use the StudySync “Review” feature to have students complete one to two evaluations of their peers’ work based on your chosen review rubric. Have the students look at and reflect upon the peer evaluations of their own writing. What might you do differently in a revision? How might you strengthen the writing and the ideas?

**Extension (additional 80 minutes)**

e. **Write** (*W.3.1-2, 4-6, 8, 10*). For homework, have students write an essay using one of the prompts you did not choose to do in class. Students should publish their responses online.

f. **Write** (*W.3.3-4, 6, 8, 10*). While we can infer that Leigh wrote a letter to his dad at some point before the second excerpt, we don’t actually know what the letter said. In a creative writing assignment, ask students to pretend they’re Leigh and write the letter they would have written to their dad if they were in Leigh’s shoes. Would they be angry? Sad? Polite? Make sure students think about how they would address the issues at hand if Leigh’s situation were really theirs.

g. **Write** (*RL.3.5 and W.3.3-4, 8*). Have students compose a short letter to the author of another book they’ve read and discussed in class. Then, if possible, send them out! Make sure students include self-addressed, stamped envelopes with their letters, and understand that it may take a significant amount of time to receive a response from a famous author—and responses may never come at all, so this part of the assignment is naturally up to your discretion. Either way, collect their letters and discuss their questions as a class.
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Key Vocabulary

1. naturally (adv.) – Done without being controlled by someone or something else
2. thief (n.) – A person who steals things
3. scoop (v.) – To pick up something quickly
4. rotten (adj.) – 1. Awful or unpleasant; 2. Decayed and unable to be used or eaten
5. scowl (v.) – To frown, to look at something in anger
6. rent (n.) – An amount of money paid in exchange for being able to live in an apartment or house
7. burglar (n.) – A thief
8. big rig (n.) – A large truck pulling a trailer behind it
9. refinery (n.) – A factory where something is processed and purified (usually oil or sugar)
10. handy (adj.) – (informal) 1. Available or close; 2. Useful or helpful

Reading Comprehension Questions

Directions: Circle the best possible answer. If you don’t know the meaning of a word, look it up!

1. Leigh goes to school in _____________.
   a. New York
   b. California
   c. Minnesota
   d. we don’t know

2. At the beginning of the excerpt, Leigh tells us he is angry because _____________.
   a. Mr. Fridley put the flags up without him
   b. Mr. Fridley doesn’t seem to care about him
   c. somebody has been stealing from his lunch
   d. his mother and father are getting a divorce

3. Leigh’s father is _____________.
   a. a truck driver
   b. a farmer
   c. in the military
   d. a teacher

4. “… I thought of Mom squirting deviled crab into hundreds of little cream puff shells and making billions of tiny sandwiches for golfers to gulp and wondering if Catering by Katy would be able to pay her enough to make the rent.”

   We can infer from this passage that Leigh’s mom _________________.
   a. is wealthy
   b. plays golf
   c. works a lot
   d. all of the above
5. We can infer that the “burglar alarm” Leigh refers to in the second excerpt was probably designed to protect ______________.
   a. his mother’s
   b. his school
   c. their house
   d. his lunch

6. From Leigh’s conversation with his father we can guess that Bandit ______________.
   a. died
   b. ran away
   c. is with Leigh’s father
   d. is getting old

7. All of the following are true about Leigh’s father EXCEPT ______________.
   a. he and Leigh’s mother are divorced
   b. he drives fast when the police aren’t nearby
   c. he refuses to pay Leigh’s child support
   d. he hasn’t seen Leigh in a while

8. One of Mr. Henshaw’s books is titled ______________.
   a. Ways to Catch a Lunchbag Thief
   b. Young Writers
   c. Ways to Amuse a Dog
   d. Dear Mr. Henshaw

9. Leigh is most interested in ______________.
   a. baseball
   b. writing
   c. painting
   d. teaching

10. Which of the following words best describes Leigh’s relationship with his father?
    a. distant
    b. close
    c. loving
    d. jealous

Answer Key

1. B
2. C
3. A
4. C
5. D
6. B
7. C
8. C
9. B
10. A
Further Assignments

1. Once students have completed this StudySync Premium Lesson, have them read the entirety of Beverly Cleary’s *Dear Mr. Henshaw*. Require students to keep a reading journal as they progress through the novel by assigning a prompt based on each night’s reading at the beginning of the following class. Prompts may be general or specific, but be sure to require students to cite direct passages or examples from the text in their answers. (*RL.3.1-6, 10 and W.3.1-4*)

2. Beverly Cleary has written more than thirty children’s books. Have students read another one of her works, either as an in-class assignment or on their own time. You can either choose a particular text for all students to read (e.g., something from the *Henry Huggins* or *Ramona Quimby* series, or *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*), or you can have each student pick a different book by Cleary, reading it over the course of a few weeks and writing a report. (*RL.3.1-6, 9-10 and W.3.1-4, 7*)

3. Divide students into small groups and have each group give a visual presentation about a different aspect of Beverly Cleary’s life: her childhood, her influences, her career as a writer, etc. In their short presentations, groups should include audio or visual elements wherever applicable. Groups may also choose to present a visual timeline with several important events or achievements in Cleary’s life. (*W.3.2, 4, 7 and SL.3.1, 4-6*)

4. Ask students to consider one or both of the following prompts in a written response:
   a) How do you think Leigh’s parents’ divorce affected him? Do you know anyone who has similarly struggled with his or her parents’ divorce? How were they affected?
   b) Does this book have a happy ending? Why or why not? (Naturally, this prompt should only be given if students have read the complete text.) How does Leigh feel at the end of the book about school, the situation with his parents, etc.? Is he hopeful? Do you think the situation between Leigh’s parents will improve, and how so? (*RL.3.1-3, 6 and W.3.1-2, 4, 8*)

5. At the beginning of *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, Leigh is surprised to receive a response from author Boyd Henshaw, who asks him a series of pointed questions and encourages him to keep a diary. After your students have read this section, have them give their own answers to the questions Mr. Henshaw asks Leigh. Encourage them to spend time on this assignment and to give their answers the same kind of thought that Leigh gives them. (*W.3.1-4, 8*)

6. For English Language Learners, try rewriting one (or both) of the excerpts in the third-person. This is a good assignment for understanding different verb and sentence constructions, as well as for understanding how perspective affects a story as it is told. Discuss this as a class. What does the first-person perspective of a diary allow that a third-person perspective normally does not? Which is a better way to tell this story? Why? (*ELL*)